Looking to See

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/26725174.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham's Dogs, Jack Crawford, Will Graham's Father (mentioned)
Additional Tags:	Character Study, Kind Of, Cute Dogs, Someone Help Will Graham, Will Graham Loves Dogs, Angst, Touch-Starved Will Graham, Misunderstood Will Graham, Unseen Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter Sees Will Graham, obviously, POV Will Graham
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter
Stats:	Published: 2020-09-30 Words: 8,722 Chapters: 1/1

Looking to See

by Ooft

Summary

> “There is looking and there is seeing, Will. How do you see yourself?”
>
> Will Graham has never been seen.
>
> Until he is.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Will Graham stares at the grisly scene before him and can't understand why he's here. Not in an existential sense, but the idea that he is standing in the middle of a murder scene that is so obviously not that incredible and is being asked by Jack Crawford what happened… he doesn't know why he's here. Everything about this is completely stupid and unnecessary, Will being used as a display for the public, the 'incredible criminal profiler' of the FBI.

"What've we got here, Will?" Jack asks, sidling up beside him.

"A lovers' spat. The wedding ring's been dumped on her chest; probably cheated on her partner and got murdered for it." Will sighs, running a hand through his hair. "I've got better places to be, Jack, not just fucking showcasing for the news."

"I know, but they've been asking to see you in action for months now. I tried to hold them off as best I could." Jack shakes his head, muttering, "journalists," under his breath as an afterthought.

As if summoned, one such journalist appears, waving a pen and notebook in Will's face. "Mr Graham, would you mind me asking a few questions about your line of work?"

"Sure." Will mutters when he catches Jack's reproachful stare. He's never wanted to say 'no' to anyone as badly as he does now, desperate to get back home to his dogs and go fishing. The past few days have been full of stress, running around with the FBI, trying to help them solve a case for some petty, bland serial killer. All Will needs is a break.

After what feels like hours worth of questions being thrown at him, Will is dismissed from the crime scene by Jack. A few more journalists try to catch Will as he walks to his car, though Jack manages to intercept them before Will gets a chance to snap and tell them all to leave him the fuck alone. He's never been more grateful for Jack than he is at this moment, opening his car door and listening to questions be fired off at someone else for once.

Dog hair covers the driver's seat, but Will doesn't even bother brushing it off, sitting down on top of it all and starting up the car engine. Hannibal Lecter has told him many times that he should vacuum the car and clean all the dog fur out, but Will can’t be bothered and finds it amusing when Hannibal scrunches his nose up at the sight of his fur-speckled clothes.

The drive home is uneventful and quiet, clouds drifting lazily across the sky and the land around him slowly turning dark. A storm will come tonight, he knows, but he figures there’s still a few hours worth of fishing that can be done. Darkness is the cover some rare fish came out to swim in, hoping the blackened waters would hide their presence from their predators, like criminals slinking through the shadows in the dead of night. The fish are challenging to catch, but satisfying, tasting especially good when Will fries them up on the stove.

As he pulls up to his house, Will can already hear the dogs barking from inside his home, their paws scrabbling at the door, snuffling muzzles pressed against the cracks, as if trying to get an early smell of their master, or prise the door from its hinges.

Opening the door, Will is immediately swarmed by the dogs. They lick at any part of his body they can reach, wet tongues brushing his fingers and wrists. Will laughs at their antics as they jostle one another and fuss over him, occasionally making a playful snap at another dog's ears, before taking each other to the ground for a playfight. Kneeling down, Will reaches out and strokes each dog, scratching their ears and rubbing their chins, cooing softly to them when they sneeze and pant, chuckling when he gets headbutted by one of the dogs who hasn't been petted in a few minutes.

They all calm down again when he stands up, following him around the house with their heads tilted and tongues flicking over their lips as they watch his movements. When Will grabs his fishing rod and baits, the dogs' tails wag, knowing their master will bring home fish for them to have as a special treat after their dinner.

Will bids the dogs farewell, struggling to close the door on their inquisitive noses and chuckling at the sight of the dogs running to leap on the couch and peer at him through the windows as he walks away from the house and heads down toward the river with his fishing rod slung over his shoulder. As he predicted, the clouds in the sky have grown darker, blocking out the last of daylight and leaving Will to turn on his torch, stepping across the frosty ground carefully. The sounds of the river bubble not far off, inviting and soothing to his frayed nerves, beckoning for him to plunge his way through the icy water and stay for a while, a call he can't refuse.

The river sits before him and he steps in, cursing softly at the sensation of bitter cold biting into his skin and climbing into his blood, making him shiver violently, teeth chattering. Biting through the cold, Will shakes his shoulders and wades further out into the water, the frigid wetness rising to just below his knees. After securing his footing and setting himself up with his bait on the rod, he casts the line and turns the torch off, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Everything around him falls silent, it seems, though he's aware of the bubbling water and swishing leaves in the trees, wind stirring his hair with a faint whisper, like a gentle caress.

He assumes it's like a caress - physical affection is something Will has never been used to. When he was a boy growing up, his father was good to him, as good as he could be, but he didn't often touch Will or hug him. When he was on his deathbed, he told Will it was because he reminded him of his mother. It was a reasonable excuse, Will knows now, but it has left him constantly craving physical affection as an adult, though fearful of it at the same time. To touch seemed to possess and dominate, to force another to yield to you and respond, to submit to your whims in order to receive one of the most basic human yearnings. Will finds himself a victim of such yearnings, wanting nothing more than for someone to reach out and brush his face with their fingers or pull him in close for an embrace that would last only a few moments, but felt like it could last an eternity. The simplicity of what he is asking for is astounding, yet in his overworked mind it seems complicated and impolite to expect such soft treatment when he himself has such a hard heart, unwilling to return the same level of physicality to another due to his awkwardness and distrust.

A healthy relationship seems complicated and impolite. Will can trust himself to be in an imbalanced position with another, just not one where the odds are placed in his favour. That's probably the reason he likes Hannibal; the man has possession over him, can manipulate and meld him easily - partially because Will lets him, but it's mostly due to Hannibal's own

efforts that he has Will wrapped tightly around his little finger. Resistance is fleeting in Will's life, him rarely valuing futile attempts to escape the whims of others, feeling as though the harder he tries to get away, the harder they try to pull him in, like a fish caught on a bait, hooked by a part of itself so vulnerable and senseless that it becomes too fearful to tear itself away. Will feels as safe with Hannibal as he does threatened, the two rising and falling against each other in an eternal battle without a victor.

To use Hannibal's metaphor of the teacup (a metaphor Will's thoughts often return to) Will feels as though he is a precious, antique teacup being used for the most mundane of tasks by a clumsy, chubby-fingered child, always waiting for the inevitable moment when the child will drop him in a moment of confusion, shattering him on the cold floor below and unable to clean the mess, for fear of being cut. After that final break, he will never be whole again. If he gives into his desires to be closer to Hannibal, to feel for him, suddenly he is a teacup being used for mundane tasks by a precise, slim-fingered adult, whom in a moment of cold calculation and boredom will drop him to the floor and let him shatter, leaving the mess for someone else to clean, for fear of nothing but his own indignity.

His thoughts are broken when the line of the fishing rod tugs harshly. Will begins to reel the line in, listening to the telltale *splish* of the water as the fish caught at the end of the line writhes and flaps, its tail flicking back and forth as it searches for any possible escape.

When Will catches fish, he scans them and decides what to do with them as quickly as he can, not wanting them to suffer at his hands any more than they need to. The fish he's caught is the correct size, perfect for eating, so he removes it from the line and kills it, slipping it into a bag he keeps with him when he's fishing, sealing it closed to prevent it from losing its freshness in a similar way to how the mural killer from the silos preserved the bodies he used in his art to keep them coloured.

Rain begins to fall and Will debates whether he should continue fishing. The river swelling and becoming dangerous is a very real possibility, but bleak weather is always good for fishing, if one can stand to be out in the midst of it for a few hours.

Before he can decide what to do, he hears a howling from nearby, pained and throaty. Will takes a hesitant step in the direction of the howling, unsure of whether this is simply his imagination or real life-

The howling sounds again, louder and whinier. Putting his torch in his mouth, Will wades out of the river and up onto its banks, placing his feet firmly on the slippery rocks and praying he doesn't fall over. Head swinging around, he searches for a place to put his fishing rod, gaze settling on a particular set of rocks that he can slide the fishing rod against and wedge between the gap, ensuring its safety against harsh weather. In a moment of clumsiness, he slices his hand on something he can't see properly, but he bites away the pain, thinking of all the times he's felt worse.

Will lets his ears guide him in the direction of the howling animal, using his torch to watch the ground immediately beneath his feet, cursing softly when his shoes sometimes slide in the mud and struggle to find purchase against the slick leaves littering the ground. The howling grows quieter and more pitiful the closer he gets, starting loud, before lilting and tapering off into a throaty moan. It sounds heartbreaking, really.

The source of the howling is a pup, lying on the ground with its leg caught in a barbed bear trap. Will drops to his knees and immediately gets to work, squinting to check that the metal isn't rusted or ruined, which will mean chances of infection and difficult manoeuvring. Thankfully, the bear trap is in perfect condition, meaning it will be reasonably easy to break its hold and let the poor, injured puppy slip away from it.

Will reaches forward to touch the bear trap, but only manages to draw the attention of the pup. With pained, although dangerous, glittering eyes, the pup watches Will, glaring at his shaking fingers and bearing its small, sharp teeth in a snarl that will one day inspire fear, but for now only serves to make Will sigh in exasperation as he figures out the best approach.

Patting down his jacket pockets, Will fumbles around and tries to take inventory, even though he can't see a damn thing in the pelting rain other than the pup and the trap it's caught in. His fingers brush over miscellaneous items he can't discern any meaning in, before his fingers finally brush against something that makes a crinkly, plastic sound, indicating it is a bag of some sort. Pulling it out, Will holds it directly in front of the torch that he still has sitting in his mouth, trying to see the label of the bag.

It's full of dried liver treats, something his dogs love. Will always keeps them in his pockets these days, in case he finds a stray dog that needs coaxing - not too unlike the pup lying before him now. With a soft knicker and a slow hand, Will offers the pup a treat from the bag, smiling at the way its little ears prick up with interest, its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Whining softly, it leans forward and snatches the treat from between Will's fingers, pulling back with its prize and chewing emphatically, like a food critic at a restaurant trying to gauge the taste of the food that has been set before them.

Will reaches forward to try and get to the trap again, but the pup growls and snaps at his fingers, clamping down on thin air when he pulls away. Chuckling, he holds out another treat and watches as the pup gobbles that down, still chewing in that amusing, over-exaggerated manner, probably due to the tough and stretchy texture of the treat that's designed to cling to teeth and force dogs to chew more firmly, as it's good for their dentistry. The pup gives its lips a satisfied lick, though the dazed look is interrupted when the pup's injured leg flinches and causes its whole body to convulse in pain, a high whine escaping its parted jaws.

Shoving the bag back in his pocket, Will curses and dives straight for the bear trap, grabbing at it and wrenching it apart. As he does so, the pup startles with a yelp, twisting its head and snapping down on Will's arm, its teeth burrowing into his skin like a set of small needles. On instinct, Will threw his arm out, though the pup was still clinging there, flying into the air and keeping its teeth buried into Will's arm like a vice, eyes glinting in the vague light cast by the torch, though not fully illuminated.

For a moment, Will can imagine the Stag Man biting him, smiling gleefully and pulling away with a mouthful of flesh in his mouth, the blood dripping from his chin to the forest floor, staining the leaves and flooding the ground, not washed away by the rain but instead adding to it, making it build up and spill all over Will, the levels of blood and water rising to his calves, then his knees and his thighs, before coming to-

The pup kicks its legs in the air, scrabbling for purchase and unsure of what to do. Will stands up, freezes, then kneels back down, lowering the pup to the ground and waiting for it to stop

panicking, to realise there is a solid space for it to rest its feet. Eyes blown wide with fear, the pup prises its teeth from Will's arm and cowers, tail tucked between its legs and head bowed. Hand wrapped in a fist, Will holds it out as a peace offering to the pup, allowing it to sniff him and watch him, before stepping forward and collapsing against him. Gentle and ever-so-careful, Will picks the pup up and slips it into the front of his jacket, holding it with one arm and shielding it from the weather as best he can. It's so small and fragile in his arms, shaking and barely breathing.

Dark thoughts flash into his mind: crushing the pup with his bare hands, watching the life fade from its eyes; dropping it on the ground and walking away, glancing back to see if it's dragging its miserable, wretched self along behind him; snapping its other leg into the bear trap and watching it squirm until it gives up and dies with nothing more than a whimpering moan to remember it by.

He shakes his head in a way that would certainly make psychiatrists call him crazy, trying to dissipate the horrific imagery swimming around inside his head. It seems the harder he shakes, the more persistent the thoughts become, as though he is shaking them loose rather than shaking them out. Giving up, he places his attention on the ground at his feet, occasionally wiping water from his face when it gets into his eyes, blinking harder than he needs to and combing his hair back from his face with hooked, sharp fingers that dig into his skull and draw pain, distracting him from the throbbing ache that has settled in his arm from where the pup bit him. While he doubts the pup's jaw had been powerful enough to clench and break skin, he knows that the bite was fueled by fear, meaning it was a lot harsher than anything he's used to already, probably being vicious enough to leave an ugly bruise of some form. It doesn't matter. He can worry about his own injuries later - the pup is more important.

Will's home sits in the distance, its faint shape like heaven in the midst of the dark and rain. The dogs will be curious about the latest addition to the family, will want to have a sniff and play with the pup the moment he steps foot into the house with it. Shivering, Will opens the door to the house and stumbles in, managing to flick the door shut behind him and continue surging forward, making his unsteady journey into the kitchen, where he can lay the pup on the bench and take a moment to breathe. As he lays the pup down, he realises the dogs aren't crowded around his feet, not even in the least bit excited to see him. Heart racing, Will goes to the living area, head swinging wildly as he searches for them, eyes shifting but frustratingly blind, not *seeing* the things around him, not comprehending them or understanding-

"Hello, Will. Are you alright?" Will's head snaps over to look at the armchair that soothing voice has come from.

Hannibal Lecter is sitting with his legs crossed, expressionless, though his eyes are attentive.

"Hannibal?" Will says, like it's a question, like Hannibal isn't sitting right there in front of him, waiting patiently and looking like a goddamn *saint* with all the dogs sitting obediently around him.

"Yes, I'm here. Are you hurt, Will?" Hannibal stands and comes over to Will, his hands reaching out to touch him, to *possess* him.

Will steps just out of reach. “I’m fine.”

For a moment, they stare at each other, neither saying a word. Will feels as though he should be saying things, should be avoiding eye contact and saying something to distract Hannibal, but then a whine comes from the kitchen and Will snaps out of his trance.

Will almost misses the way Hannibal quirks a curious eyebrow at the noise as he turns away and heads for the kitchen again. Reaching up, he opens the cupboard above the fridge and feels around inside, finding and pulling down a large box of medical supplies, half of them human, half of them animal-related. For good measure, he grabs a bag of dog treats out from one of the other cupboards and dumps that with the medical things.

The pup is splayed on the bench, kicking its injured leg and keening under its breath. Will pulls out all the supplies he will need, all the bandages and disinfectants and whatever else catches his eyes, lining everything up neatly within arm’s reach and getting to work immediately.

Snarling, the pup tries to bite Will when he begins cleaning its bloody leg, but he distracts the poor creature with a treat, making soft cooing noises as the pup scarfs the food down and snaps its jaws in the air, demanding more. Will reaches to grab out another treat, stopping when another hand intervenes.

“You tend to her leg. I’ll keep her calm,” Hannibal says, scratching the pup’s ear to prove his point. The pup whines, as if unsure of what to make of the sudden pleasure, but settles, head flopping back onto its paws, body relaxing and turning limp.

The leg looks mangled, deep, grotesque red cuts running down from a particularly deep cut - they're from when the pup tried to pull itself free from the trap. It's a wonder the leg wasn't snapped in half on impact with the trap, especially given how small the pup is, but Will realises that perhaps the trap wasn't as rust-free as he thought, not closing as tightly as it should have.

Will makes quick work of the cleaning, his hands automatic in their movements, clearing out all the dirt in a precise manner he didn’t know he’d come to possess. After everything is clean, he bandages it up, sealing away all the hurt as best he can. Hannibal has done an excellent job keeping the pup calm, he notices, staring down at the little creature that is now fast asleep, body rising and falling with each small breath it takes.

“You’re injured, Will. Would you like me to take a look?” Hannibal asks, looking down at Will, still expressionless and attentive.

Giving in and saying ‘yes’ seems so easy, but Will can’t bring himself to do it. Hannibal already has enough power over him. “I’m sure I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can, too,” Hannibal says with a slight, indulgent smile, “I just want to help you, is all.”

You want a reason to own me, Will can’t help but think as he turns away. He takes his jacket off, dumping it on the ground and raking a hand through his soaked hair. As he turns to the

medicine box and checks out his arm, he can see Hannibal grabbing the jacket from the floor and folding it over his forearm with a concerned frown.

Black and purple bruising stains Will's skin, bite marks still somehow visible, little indents among the bruises. He runs a hand over the damage, wondering if it's worth giving a quick disinfectant wipe or taking any medication for. In the end, he decides it isn't worth it, packing away all the medical supplies and moving to put the box back in the cupboard above the fridge where it belongs. As he steps, Winston comes from seemingly nowhere, tripping him up and forcing him to stand still. With an inquisitive nose and a low whine, Winston licks Will's hand. It's only then Will remembers cutting himself earlier, the pain working its way back into his brain as he stares at Winston lapping at the blood and whining, his paws stamping on the floor with anxiety, tail still. For a second, he can imagine that it’s Hannibal licking his hand, down on his knees and staring at Will with those soulless, glinting eyes, tongue and teeth turning red as the blood stains them.

Snapping out of his trance, Will puts the box back on the bench and retracts his hand from Winston, who proceeds to head butt his leg and nuzzle him.

"I'm okay, buddy," Will murmurs as he scrounges around for disinfectant wipes, unable to find any human ones and instead settling for a packet of animal ones - there’s no real difference between them, only one or two ingredient switches.

"You probably don't even need to clean the wound, now," Hannibal says, stepping forward and reaching for Will's hand.

Responding to some weird brain pulse rather than any rational thought, Will lets Hannibal take his hand. "What?"

"Did you know that back in medieval times," Hannibal says as he looks over Will's hand with a keen eye, "many peasants would keep dogs. It was partially for agricultural reasons, helping with their farms and whatnot, but the peasants also got injured while working. Because they could not afford herbal medication or doctors, they believed that a dog licking their wounds and urinating on them would heal them."

"And did it?" Will asks.

"Well, the licking did. More in the sense that it would clean the wound and stop it from becoming infected, but it worked. The urination was just another step to legitimise the process, most likely." Hannibal hums and nods as he inspects the wound. His fingers brush so gently over Will's skin that it feels intoxicating and all Will wants is for Hannibal to touch more of him, to hold his face or play with his hair, something, anything. Anything that Hannibal is willing to give him, he wants it.

Hannibal reaches into the medication box and pulls out waterproof band-aids.

“I can do it,” Will says, holding his uninjured hand out for the band-aids. Hannibal gives them to Will with a pleasant smile. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Hannibal steps back and lets Will tend to his wound, as if leaving him to do it in peace.

“So,” Will peels back the plastic of the band-aid, “what brings you here, Hannibal?”

Hannibal ponders on the question, as if Will has asked him what the meaning of life is. “I suppose I wanted to check in with you, Will. Jack told me you were anxious about the press today.”

“I’m like a zoo animal to them. What, am I supposed to *enjoy* their attention?” Will scoffs, though it’s mostly to himself than Hannibal. The band-aid on his hand doesn’t cover the entirety of the wound, but it covers the worst of it, which is good enough, in Will's eyes.

“Lots of people like attention,” Hannibal replies with a steady expression.

“I’m not like most people.” It comes out much harsher and snappy than it should, though Will couldn’t care less at this point. Every move he makes is examined under such harsh scrutiny that there is never any room to even take a breath, let alone make a mistake. It’s sickening, the way the media speaks about him and his work, like it’s easy, like it’s a job, not a life-threatening situation that he knows will one day get the best of him.

“No, you’re not,” Hannibal says.

To distract himself from Hannibal and the conversation, Will grabs the medical supply box and puts it back in its spot above the fridge, before kneeling down to pet Winston, who has been sniffing and snorting at his feet.

When Will steps past Hannibal and into the living area, he looks down at all the dogs lying around, some of them sleeping. The young pup is still lying on the kitchen bench and Will stands stockstill, pondering over the best way to introduce all the dogs to the pup without risking the poor thing’s injury.

Hannibal is watching in silence as Will grabs the pup (upon looking at its belly, Will realises that Hannibal was correct in his judgement of the pup being a ‘she’) and takes her into the living room, sitting down on the couch beside one of the bigger dogs. Will gently shakes the pup, hand placed firmly on her spine and sending tremors through her body until her bleary eyes open, gazing up at Will.

“Hi there,” Will smiles at the pup, though does so without his teeth in order to appear non-threatening.

The pup’s injured leg kicks, making her whimper and cower, burying her snout into the crook of Will’s arm.

“You look like a Bella,” Will decides as he takes in her monochrome fur, the coat of her body a shaggy texture, while her head is smooth and soft.

“She is a mutt of some sort,” Hannibal says, sitting in the armchair he'd been perched in when Will first got home, draping Will’s coat on the arm of it. “Though she looks very much

like an Australian cattle dog."

"She's very pretty." Will scratches behind her ears, making her tail wag weakly. "Aren't you, girl?"

Hannibal chuckles. "I think someone is a little jealous of the attention Bella is receiving from you, Will."

Will looks up and follows Hannibal's gaze. Winston hovers at the edge of the living space, eyeing Bella and Will with narrowed eyes and ever-moving paws, claws clicking against the ground in an anxious, unsteady pattern.

At the sight of Will patting his knee in gesture, Winston bounds forward, knocking and waking up several other dogs along the way. He snuffles eagerly at Bella, who whines in response and buries her face further into Will. Winston takes particular interest in her injured leg, sniffing at it and sneezing, before nudging the back of Bella's neck and whimpering in a way Will thinks is supposed to be sympathetic.

The other dogs rise from their respective slumbers and trot over, licking and sniffing at Bella with intrigue, each offering a noise of sympathy before returning to their earlier spots and falling back asleep. Winston is still standing when all the other dogs have wandered off, his bright eyes meeting Will's in a picture of perfect innocence that makes his heart ache. He scratches Winston's ears, smiling at the dog's silly grin and thumping tail.

"Where did you find our friend Bella?" Hannibal asks, breaking the silence between the two of them.

The sound of Hannibal's voice startles Will, like it's breaking something inside his ears, a thin barrier created by the gentle background sounds of the fire and the soft snoring of the dogs. It's not painful, though it hurts in a specific way, a confusing way.

"Will?" Hannibal prompts when Will doesn't respond. Will assumes he must have been silent for much longer than he thought he had been.

"I was out fishing. Heard her howling in the distance… went to find her and she was stuck in a bear trap." Will ran his hands over Bella's side and back. He's only remembered just now how wet they both are, too caught-up in playing doctor to even think about all the water they'd brought in from outside.

Hannibal mulls over the story. "You felt compelled to save her."

Will nods.

"Do you always feel compelled to save those that are dying?" Hannibal asks.

"Don't we all?" Will asks in turn. Always deflection, never confrontation. Confrontation was dangerous, especially with an active audience.

Hannibal shrugs and considers it, a thoughtful frown pulling at the corners of his lips. "I suppose a part of us will always feel the need to save those less fortunate than ourselves.

Though, a part of us will always feel the need to kill such things as well. Tell me, Will, if there was no way to save that pup, would you have killed it?"

"I can't think of a situation where it couldn't be saved," Will says instead of answering the question. He is somewhat telling the truth - there isn't really a situation where the pup may be injured beyond saving, though he does still understand the meaning of Hannibal's words, the way he's asking about the pup but is really implying the death of a person.

"I can think of many," Hannibal says, indirectly acknowledging Will's lie, "none can escape the inevitable possibility that one day they may be injured beyond saving and that, instead of praying for a saviour, they must pray for someone who can end their life with quiet mercy."

"'Quiet mercy,'" Will rubs Bella's side as he thinks it over, "because one can't be truly merciful if they feel compelled to parade it around."

Hannibal's head tilts in a manner that Will has come to label as his version of shaking his head. "No, they cannot. The same modesty is expected of saviours. The two are not that much different; only a thin veil lies between them."

"With wildly different results," Will finishes the thought.

"How can you be sure they are different?" Hannibal asks. "We all die, eventually. What difference does it make, whether it happens sooner or later?"

"It depends on what they did in their life, or what they were planning on doing." The answer doesn't feel entirely correct as it leaves his lips, but he can't take it back now - a part of him doesn't want to, anyway.

"You sound as though you don't believe that yourself." Hannibal's eyes glow in the light coming from the kitchen.

Will finds himself annoyed with the challenge, but can't be bothered responding. All these games with Hannibal grow old, becoming more and more tedious as time goes on.

Sighing, Will looks down at Bella and debates his next course of action. He's hungry, a dull ache in his stomach, and he's wet, clothes and hair clinging to his skin. The dogs will be hungry as well; they've been waiting for him to get home and give them their dinner.

"I brought over some food, in case you hadn't eaten dinner yet," Hannibal says, like he's read Will's mind. "Let me take Bella, while you get changed into some warmer clothes. I'm sure Jack couldn't handle your absence due to only illness."

'Only illness'. A strange way to phrase it, but practical and so, so very *Hannibal.*

"Thank you." Will stands, cradling Bella in his arms and stepping over the sleeping dogs on the floor.

Hannibal reaches up to take her and as Will passes her limp body over, a horrible image comes to mind: Hannibal, grabbing Bella's neck and *twisting* it until it snaps, killing her with 'quiet mercy'. He shakes the thought away. For a few moments, he watches as Hannibal

settles Bella across his lap, careful of her leg and and lolling head. When Bella settles with a soft, sleep-ridden sigh, Will steps away, moving from the living area to his bedroom, grabbing warm, dry clothes and heading to the bathroom.

Only as he stands in the shower and lets the hot water wash over him does he realise that he should've started a fire in the living room. It's cold in there, it always is and he's never bothered to buy a heater of any sort due to the fireplace being so well-built, as well as the wood for it being easy to access. Hannibal must be freezing, not to mention Bella, her body too busy trying to heal itself to have energy for temperature control. He decides to do it when he gets out of the shower.

Changing into warm clothes after being cold and soaking wet from the rain has always felt like a nostalgia trip to Will. Memories brush through his mind as he pulls on a soft pair of pants, whispers of times he'd been playing out in the rain and called into the house for dinner, his father laughing and telling him to go and take a shower before the food was served. Pulling on his dry shirt, he thinks back to when he was very little, running along the beach in the summer sun, seawater clinging to him. The sweater he pulls on next reminds him of Christmastime, of sitting by the fireplace with a cup of hot cocoa and relaxing after a long day of playing in the snow, his father sitting on the couch near him - not touching - dozing off.

Hannibal's lips twitch at the corners in a pleasant smile when Will comes back into the living area, knowing his posture indicates to Hannibal his guilt over the frigid air. Not speaking, Will moves to the fireplace and sets the wood correctly in the grill, before striking a match and setting it down. The flames creep up along the logs and twigs, setting them ablaze and crackling. At the foreign sound, the dogs wake, ears standing up on alert as their heads swing around and search for any new threats, tails still and tongues in closed jaws.

"Dinner time," Will announces to the dogs.

At the syllable 'din', the dogs' tails begin to wag and they scramble to their feet, hot on Will's heels as he walks into the kitchen and pulls their dinner from the fridge. Bright-eyed and snuffling, they watch as Will scrapes their dinner from the large container into their bowls.

Absent-minded, Will watches as the dogs gobble down their food, sometimes snapping and huffing at each other, but ultimately too occupied with eating like they'll never get the opportunity to do so again. Hannibal is watching as well, his gaze piercing through Will's mind, even though he knows he's not the one being stared at by Hannibal.

Will walks back to Hannibal, avoiding eye contact as he grabs his jacket. He pulls the fish he'd caught earlier from one of the pockets and deposits it into the fridge.

"I left the containers of dinner on your dining table," Hannibal says when Will wanders into the living room, not sure what to do with himself now that the dogs are fed. "There are some vegetables and meat that can be heated in the microwave, as well as some sausages for the dogs."

Will goes to the dining table and finds the containers as instructed. As he picks them up and carries them to the kitchen, he notices how cold they feel in his hands, long-abandoned.

“How long were you waiting before I got back?” Will asks as he scrapes the food from the containers out onto plates.

“Only half an hour,” Hannibal says.

Half an hour with an hour's drive. The timeline makes sense, which serves to add to Will's guilt over the fireplace.

Will puts the food into the microwave and sets it up, allowing the whirring sounds it makes to give him an excuse to not respond to Hannibal, to not apologise for his absence, to not have a breakdown over all the stress he can feel building up in the back of his mind and the crushing weight it spills onto his shoulders.

“The dogs were very happy to see me,” Hannibal says, stroking Bella’s belly.

“They were very interested in your containers of food, I bet.” Joking is a good way to relax himself, especially jokes that manage to get out of the ‘self-deprecating’ zone. Getting out of that zone is becoming harder and harder these days.

Hannibal smiles at Will. “Of course.”

The microwave beeps, jarring to Will’s ears. He rushes over and opens it, pulling the plates out and shutting the door with more force than necessary. Usually, he’d set the plates on the dining table and eat there, but tonight Hannibal is with him and is stuck in an armchair with a pup in his lap, so Will takes the plate over to Hannibal and rests it on the arm of the chair, handing over cutlery as well. Hannibal thanks him and doesn’t mention anything about their eating arrangements, something Will is grateful for.

Thunder rumbles overhead, splitting and sudden, making Will jolt as he goes to eat his first mouthful of dinner. Yelping, the dogs abandon the kitchen and run to Will’s bed, scurrying beneath it and bundling together. Only Winston remains, prancing and stamping his paws, ears cocked. At the next crash of thunder, he whimpers. Will pats the couch, indicating that Winston should jump up onto the empty space beside him and cuddle up, warm and safe from the storm outside with his fearless master to protect him. Will finds himself wishing it were this easy to save people from their issues in everyday life.

“I always found it interesting that humans can take such comfort in storms, yet other animals fear it immensely,” Hannibal says, eyeing Winston, who is now pressed against Will’s leg.

“Not all people like storms,” Will replies.

“You do.” It’s a statement, not a question or suggestion. Hannibal says it as though it is a fact, one that he’s known ever since he was first introduced to Will.

“They hurt my ears,” Will says, like it has any relevance to the conversation,

Hannibal is silent as he continues staring into the fire. Chewing his food, he nods minutely and turns to look at Will. “Tell me about your father, Will.”

“That’s almost as lazy and random as when you asked about my mother,” Will says in the driest tone he can, hoping his humour can hide the anxious beating of his heart away from Hannibal’s keen observations.

“Lazy, perhaps, but not random.” Hannibal’s eyes gleam with something Will can’t quite place. Pride, maybe. Or interest.

No, nothing is ever random with Hannibal and Will feels stupid for suggesting it. Being in Hannibal’s presence gives Will the uneasy sense he is being *seen,* like someone is taking the time to look at him and think of all the things *he* is thinking of, reading all his memories and hauntings and understanding them with a perfect clarity he can’t possibly begin to comprehend. Hannibal possesses such clarity and Will knows that Hannibal sees something in him that he can’t see himself. Will wants to ask him what he sees so badly it makes his head spin, but he always refrains, letting Hannibal ask the questions and observe him, to further develop whatever opinion he has already formed. It’s safer, doing things in a way that leaves Will without an answer.

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you,” Will says. The more specific Hannibal is, the less Will has to tell him.

“Whatever you like.” Hannibal’s expression doesn’t change, his voice lilting in that pleasant, polite manner it always does.

It's so very typical of him to leave it as an open question.

“He was good,” Will says, gaze alternating between his food, Winston and the fireplace, “as good as he could be. Worked hard. Taught me what he was able to whenever he had a spare minute. He got sad sometimes, but he put up with it.”

‘Sad’ is such a juvenile way to put it. ‘Achingly depressed’ is probably a more accurate term, really capturing the essence of the empty gaze Will's father often transfixed him with as a child.

“Sad about what?” Hannibal asks. His tone suggests he’s already guessed an answer and is only prompting Will, hoping their ideas match.

Will shrugs. “We didn’t talk much about it. Mostly Mom, I think, but there were other things. Always other things to make the situation worse.”

“What kinds of things did your father teach you?” Hannibal asks.

“Fishing. Repairing things. Making ends meet. Caring for wildlife.” All those answers sound the same. “Practical things.”

“Arguably the most important kind of knowledge a parent can pass onto their child,” Hannibal says in a conversational tone, a knowing smile tugging at his lips.

“Other than emotional nourishment?” It comes out *much* more bitter than it is supposed to.

Hannibal considers the question, staring into the fire with complete concentration. “Some would say a parent that allows their child to feel pain has done the best job of raising them.”

“What about agony?” Will asks before he can stop himself.

Agony was not something he’d truly experienced as a child. Maybe as a teenager, yes, but agony is not something he associates with his childhood, however unfortunate it was. He had been loved, fed and sheltered - that’s more than some can say.

“Were you agonised as a child, Will?” Hannibal has seen straight through his impulsiveness.

"I don't think I was ever happy." Always deflecting, no matter how easy the truth can be.

"Pain teaches us that happiness is only fleeting," Hannibal has finished eating, setting his cutlery down primly on the plate and turning his full attention to Will. "Tell me, Will, when are you happy?"

There are so many answers to this question, Will isn't sure where to start. It will be easy to turn into a joke and just as easy to turn it into a serious discussion, but he doesn't have the energy for either, really.

“When there’s no one else around,” Will says. It’s the truth, the real, honest truth. He is happiest when there is no one else to spectate him, to judge him and decide things about him.

Hannibal’s head tilts. “You feel constricted by their opinions of you. You believe that they are seeing you in the way they see themselves in the mirror; they only see what they are presented with, not what they have to go searching for.”

“What do you see, Hannibal?” Every deflection he’s tried with Hannibal has now fallen apart with this simple question. Whatever Hannibal says, it won’t satisfy Will - not the way he wants it to.

“I see a man who claims to be fearful of rejection, yet has only ever rejected himself. You are not scared of killers or pain or anything other than your own mind, afraid of what you are capable of when you lose consciousness of your decisions.” Hannibal pauses, thinks and continues. “Everything you do is for the good of others, yet you feel as if you fall short, destined to the inadequacy you’ve been told you suffer from your whole life.”

It isn’t a satisfying answer. Will stays silent, hoping it will get better, that Hannibal will suddenly tell him something he doesn’t already know, something he hasn’t already guessed.

“A bad psychiatrist would say your mother leaving you and your father was what triggered your feelings of inadequacy. They would think you are trapped reliving it to this day, unable to escape the cycle of feelings that make you feel as though you will never be good enough for anyone, though that is only half correct.” It’s as if Hannibal’s gaze is bearing holes into Will’s skull and he wants nothing more than to look away, but he is transfixed, held captive by the intoxicating feeling that for once, just once, he is being *seen.* “You feel inadequate

because you don't meet your own standards, not anyone else's. Like your father, you believe you could provide someone with a good life, that you could be a good father or partner or friend, but that you will one day make a mistake that could cost them their life, and then it'll be as though perhaps you were better off not knowing them at all.

"You want to be touched, seen by another, yet you feel unworthy of such a privilege, like you should work harder to gain it and work harder still to keep it. Part of you believes that even if someone were to see you, it means that they would hate you for it, or that they would be just as horrific and broken as you are, because that is the only way anyone could possibly understand you. You're transfixed on ideals you don't believe in and think everyone around you is the same.

"Is that how you see yourself?"

A strange question. Will isn't entirely sure how he sees himself. He is less than everyone around him, he knows that, but he doesn't have many other opinions of his own existence, content to let everyone else decide for him, even though he hates their attention. It's not that he *feels* inadequate, it's that he *is*. He will never be good enough for the people around him, will never fill out the form they have given him.

"I try not to look at myself," Will says. All the energy he had somehow mustered when he woke up this morning is spent now, his mind feeling groggy and slightly dizzy, as if his brain has turned to mush inside his skull.

"There is looking and there is seeing, Will. How do you see yourself?" Hannibal asks.

"I don't." Will stands and picks up his empty plate, reaching to grab Hannibal's as well.

Hannibal grabs his wrist, gazing up at him, but Will stares at the floor and refuses to meet his eyes. "Tell me, Will: do I see you?"

It's as though gravity pulls him to meet Hannibal's eyes as he says it. "Yes." It seems like the truth, feels like it, tastes like it as it leaves his tongue.

"You told me I wouldn't like you when you were psycho-analysed. Yet, here I am." Hannibal smiles up at him, his lips curving into something proper and genuine, eyes softening for a moment. His fingers are still wrapped around Will's wrist, though they are loose and lax against his skin now, not holding him hostage, but centring him.

"Here you are," Will repeats. The tension in the air is suffocating.

"I would love to offer you my assistance with the dishes," Hannibal says, letting go of Will and settling back into the armchair like nothing has happened, "but a small, injured pup is using my legs as a bed."

Not trusting himself to speak, Will nods and walks off, taking the plates with him and ignoring the feeling of his skin crawling. Itchiness takes hold of him, the overwhelming urge to scratch away all the creeping dirt from his flesh. Despite having a shower only a short while ago, he feels dirty and messy, covered in an unknown, murky substance that makes him

feel constricted, like the air around him is full of dust and he can't breathe properly, lungs not filtering out the dust but instead spreading it through his body like a disease.

Scrubbing the dishes clean is a good distraction - for a short while. Then, he's returning to Hannibal in the living room, the thunder of the storm further jarring his already frayed nerves, like he's stumbling through the literal dark, though he's only being faced with the metaphorical dark of his mind. As he sits on the couch, the clopping of hooves sounds behind him, somehow ringing high above the volume of the storm outside, piercing the thin veil in his ears and hurting his brain with pulses of electricity. He wants to cry, he realises. He wants to do it quite badly.

Tears haven't threatened him in decades, but here he is now with a lump in his throat that he can't swallow and a pain prickling through his eyes. Sighing, he rubs his face, wincing as his shoulders shake involuntarily, preparing themselves for a bout of violent tears and pained moans, somehow remembering the movements of Will's old crying episodes, even after all these years of bottling up his feelings.

He sighs again, drinking up the tension it relieves in his body and the way it allows him to take a deep, shuddering breath. A few more times and the pain in his body subsides, leaving him shivering.

Hannibal doesn't acknowledge Will's weakness. "I should be going," he says instead, gazing outside to the storm currently raging, "it will take me awhile to get home in this weather, so I should be leaving as soon as I can. My apologies, Will. I would love to stay longer."

"Sure," Will says, standing. He takes Bella from Hannibal and, in a moment of bravery (and perhaps impulsiveness) lays her down beside Winston to rest. Winston blinks at Will and nods his head with a snuffle, wrapping his furry body around Bella's.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Hannibal says when Will opens the front door for him.

"Thanks for dinner," Will says in kind. Another impulse comes to him. "Feel free to come around anytime. Even without Jack telling you to."

Hannibal smiles and nods. "I extend the same invitation to you."

Will watches as Hannibal leaves, still feeling the whisper of heat in his wrist from where Hannibal grabbed him, the warmth in his hand from where Hannibal caressed it and looked over it, as if his gaze alone could heal Will's wound.

As he sits on the couch beside Winston, Will thinks that perhaps Hannibal *can* heal him. He just has to let him see.

End Notes

Holy shit, my love for these two is unending! There's definitely going to be some Molly content coming along, though, because I really like her too.

On a completely unrelated note, I want a dog. Maybe nine. Also, I'm deeply disappointed that 'Cute Dogs' is not an official tag; all I want is to read about Will and his dogs, and maybe Hannibal complaining about all the fur they get on his suits.

Also please leave comments telling me what you think! Comments make my day.

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